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# Popular cultural policy: National Day and national songs in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

*Singaporean cultural policy is about censoring the media and maintaining social and political control, while at the same time extracting economic value from various aspects of the arts and culture. While outlining (pre)existing cultural-policy positions, this paper looks briefly at recent policy frameworks in Singapore, namely Singapore 21 (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999) and the Renaissance City Report (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000a). It argues that these statements aim to convince citizens to embrace sociocultural change for the good of the nation. To ensure that these messages reach and engage citizens, the Singapore Government employs a mass popularisation strategy mobilising popular cultural items—most notably national pop songs and music video clips. As this paper will evince, the lyrics and mediated video images of these popular national songs are not only powerful purveyors of the myth of nationhood, but essential tools of cultural policy with the immediate effect of reinforcing the hegemony of the economic and legitimising the political in Singapore.*

## INTRODUCTION: THE 'REALITY' OF SINGAPORE

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This is one of the greatest strengths about Singapore: its willingness to face reality including the 9th of August... Every year, on this 9th August for many years ahead—how many, I do not know—we will dedicate ourselves anew to consolidate ourselves to survive; and most important of all, to find an enduring future for what we have built and what our forbears will build up. (Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister of Singapore, first National Day Rally Speech, 1966, August 8)

On 8 August 1966, the eve of the first anniversary of an independent Republic of Singapore, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivered the inaugural National Day Rally Speech to the nation<sup>1</sup>. Among other things, Lee recounted the

unpleasant chain of events leading to Singapore's sudden ejection from Malaysia on 9 August 1965. The official reason for Singapore's reluctant separation was Malaysia's unwillingness to embrace a 'Malaysian Malaysia' agenda, where non-communalist politics and multiracial integration is paramount (Lee, 1965; see also Lee, 1966). In short, Singapore was to become what Malaysia would not be. In his Rally speech, Lee reiterated his Government's social and cultural policy of multiracialism—encompassing also the familiar elements of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multireligiosity—which 'survives' to this day. Indeed, Singapore's first National Day was filled with politically charged innuendoes and the rhetoric of national survival.

Significantly, Lee forged Singapore's national 'reality' with his decree that every 9 August would be set aside as a day of dedication. It is noteworthy that Lee's original idea of a National Day had little to do with the pomp and pageantry or the carnival elements of today's National Day Parades (NDP)<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the term 'celebration' was palpably omitted from Lee's speech. The National Day Lee envisaged had a stern and phlegmatic demeanour, akin to a memorial service to honour victims or veterans of a war or tragedy. Lee's intention was to orchestrate the invention of a State-defined Singaporean national culture-cum-identity (see Velayuthum, 1995, p. 42). Although the precise shape and definition of being 'Singaporean' remains vague and contentious, it was made pointedly clear from the outset that it had to be distinct from Malaysian culture and identity. Multiracialism as the refusal to privilege people based on race and ethnicity thus became the founding—and foundational—cultural policy of modern Singapore.

Singapore's National Day has always been a prime site for the (re)articulation of national goals. It is an opportunity for the ruling People Action Party (PAP) Government to announce and 'soft-sell' new policy agendas. Despite the historical, political, and cultural gravity of Singapore's National Day, few critical insights have been proffered on the event, with the exception of journalistic reports and government statements. Writers commenting on Singapore's approach to National Day tend to focus on its grandeur, and the various nationalistic aspects of the annual and epic National Day Parade (NDP)—the highlight of the month-long celebration<sup>3</sup>—to the extent that it has become a cliché to consider the parade a ritualised and stylised attempt at cultivating nationalist sentiments, and thereby developing a habitus of the 'imagined communities' of nationality (Anderson, 1983). Leong (1999) analyses the NDP as a commodity to be consumed by two fairly disparate groups of Singaporeans: the 'believers' of the myth of the Singaporean

'nation' and the 'unbelievers'. The believers are (mostly) convinced that Singapore is governed by the best possible bureaucrats and power-holders; the unbelievers are those citizens Leong describes as 'repressed consumers', who prefer to find other (non-patriotic) modes of distraction. Devashayam (1990) makes a similar observation, highlighting the significance of identity formation within the annual NDP, and the resulting (lack of) response from citizens.

Another approach is to treat the NDP as a media and/or mediatory event. Lim's (1999) analysis of the live telecast of the 1993 NDP on Singapore national television is a case in point. As Lim points out, the media(ted) spectacle of the NDP is a powerful tool in engendering public consumption of and 'staged' participation in the event. Velayutham (1995) takes a slightly different approach, positioning the NDP as a mediatory event aimed at publicising and negotiating the differences, divisions, conflicts, and contradictions that result from Singapore's multiracial multireligious, multilingual, and multicultural national polity and cultural policies<sup>4</sup>. Velayutham notes that the NDP is actively involved in processes of identity mediation and the management of difference for 'the purpose of positioning the nation and the character of its people' for the sake of economic progress (1995, p. iv).

This paper, while acknowledging the mediatory and other signifying practices of the National Day Parade, will accentuate the importance of new populist or popularisation strategies adopted by the Singapore Government in its annual planning and execution of recent National Day celebrations. It will demonstrate that, while the date 9 August has remained (since Lee Kuan Yew's dedication in 1966), the elements, style, and focus of the day have shifted.

If successfully implemented, the popularisation of events and symbols associated with Singapore's National Day has the potential to change social and cultural attitudes. While listening to a speech delivered by the eloquent Lee Kuan Yew was popular in 1966, it would be difficult to incite the same fervour and participation today. Likewise, while past National Days emphasised political survival and nation building, recent National Days reflect the changing social, cultural, and political demands of Singapore and Singaporeans. Nevertheless, there was—and still is—a need to engage citizens in as many ways as possible. This is where the cultural policy-cum-strategy of popularisation comes in. By popularising national events, songs, and symbols, the nation becomes socially, culturally, and aesthetically pleasing—even entertaining—to the ordinary consumer-as-citizen, thus rendering the often arduous task of communicating (especially unpopular) Governmental messages and/or

new policy ideas easier and more manageable. The creation of an atmosphere of celebration through the popularisation of national events, songs, and symbols can also be perceived as a strategy of engagement—where Singaporeans, especially the young and/or the politically less-informed, would be incited to participate by internalising the sights and sounds of 'nationhood'.

This paper considers Singapore's cultural policy by looking at the National Day 2000 celebrations and the discourse of national songs. It shows how Singapore's cultural policy is asserted and framed in and through the promotion of entertainment, as well as through the popularisation of media and cultural products. It takes a particular interest in the audio-visual making—and remaking—of a few well-known national songs (Ministry of Information & the Arts [MIA], 2000). The commissioning and composing of heart-warming national songs has, arguably, emerged as one of the most powerful and successful popularisation strategies adopted by the Singapore Government. By analysing the lyrics of and music-video images portrayed by these national songs, this paper attempts to gather or make sense of Singapore's cultural policy and direction.

#### **POPULAR(ISING) CULTURE AS/AND POLICY**

'Cultural displays can be used to say new things, foster new understandings, promote old ones, valorize and legitimate stances by governments, peoples, or communities' (Kurin, 1995, p. 12). Over the 36-year history of independent Singapore, National Day organisers and their respective committees have tried and tested various ways of engaging and inducing nationalistic pride. Visually appealing items—such as laser shows, fireworks, military hardware displays and stunts, free-falling commandos, multi-coloured floats, mass flashcards, and other cultural displays—have become a regular part of the National Day Parade program. The mobilisation of a celebratory mood and the creation of an atmosphere of fun are equally (if not more) important to incite participation at events such as parades and carnivals. Party atmosphere, as I observed<sup>5</sup>, was a key component in the National Day 2000 celebrations. A national carnival—'Carnival@TheBay'—aimed at the young and tech-savvy sections of the population, was held at Marina South, 44 hectares of reclaimed land touted as Singapore's new downtown of the 21st century (Andrianie, 2000a, 2000b). Designed as a theme park, one of the highlights of the four-day-long carnival was a group of mini-villages showcasing the culture, handicrafts, dances, and, indeed, the (folk) music of Singapore's four official ethnic categorisations: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian (or 'others'). These mini-villages were constructed

to reinforce the nation's multiracialism policy and to (re)assert its importance for Singapore's political and cultural stability in the new millennium. Also featured were four large figurines, once again representing the four ethnic groups, in their 'traditional' costumes. (These figurines were to make their grand appearance at a mass display at the National Day Parade 2000.) NDP 2000 was themed 'Together, We Make The Difference', mirroring the title of Singapore's latest vision statement *Singapore 26*. Described as 'mass entertainment' (Chng, 2000a) and 'the grandest bash yet' (Andrianie, 2000c, p. 1), NDP 2000 had an unprecedented focus on fun, partying, and participation. Spectators were urged to cheer, sing out loud, wave little national flags, blaze their torches, drum a rhythm in unison (on their hand-held drum kit), even scream, as a demonstration of their love for Singapore<sup>7</sup>.

Far from merely symbolising the nation's survival, 9 August has become possibly the most popular social and cultural event in Singapore. Its popularity is comparable to a sell-out rock-music concert, with aspiring spectators having to queue overnight, often for more than 12 hours, just to obtain two tickets to the big parade ('Camping overnight for NDP tickets', 2000). Those unable to obtain tickets have to be content with live telecast or webcast (options made available since the 1994 National Day) (Teo, 2000). Not only is the NDP webcast a powerful demonstration of Singapore's technological competence and readiness for the new information economy, it also enables the transcendence of the traditional domestic sphere of a national audience to a greater global audience, reaching out especially to Singaporeans residing abroad (Lim, 1999, p. 142).

While it is undeniable that the NDP is a great source of entertainment, with the live telecast consistently attaining one of the highest free-to-air television ratings, the degree of national pride instilled, if at all quantifiable, remains somewhat questionable. Leong (1999) suggests that, for some, the motive for attending the parade is the free parade kit containing a wide range of goodies and discount vouchers (p. 11). On 8 August 2000, *The Straits Times* daily reported that the much-coveted tickets to the NDP were being sold on the Internet for amounts ranging from S\$50 to S\$250 or more per ticket (Arshad, 2000, p. 1), buyers rationalising the 'black market' price as a 'token of appreciation' for long hours of queuing.

Like any other forms of popular culture, Singapore's National Day—the parade, as well as the event in general—is a discursive site of meaning-making and contestation. It is ideally suited for debates surrounding the imaginary status of the 'nation', as exemplified in issues pertaining

to national identity and culture, shared values, patriotism and parochialism, and so on. For example, as National Day approaches every year, the national press finds itself inundated with letters about the representation of the national flag and whether displaying it outside the home signifies patriotism (Leong, 1999, p. 12). Debates of such nature are always polarised, even futile, some believing that displaying the flag demonstrates national pride ('Let us show the flag', 2000), others arguing that true patriotism needs no such public showcasing ('Flag not a must', 2000). Of course, there are yet others who are simply unperturbed or unmoved, fitting neatly into Leong's aforementioned category of 'unbelievers'. The displaying of a national flag, however, is circumscribed by the rules and regulations governing its public display and use. According to a Ministry of Information and the Arts memorandum, flags may be displayed only between 1 August and 31 August every year, and each flag must be treated respectfully:

The flag must also be washed and dried indoors separately, and not together with other laundry. If it is torn or worn-out, it should be disposed of by packing it in a sealed, black trash bag. Or it can be handed to the nearest Residents' Committee or community centre for disposal. ('Raise the flag with pride', 2000)

With such clear and rigid instructions, Singapore's notoriety as a well-regulated—or perhaps over-regulated—'nanny' state is made manifest here. While it remains uncertain whether or not the abovementioned rules pertaining to the flag are properly adhered to, what is interesting is the way in which ideas and meanings are contested in Singapore. The issue as of whether or not to display the national flag offers a glimpse of the PAP Government's highly measured but successful approach to policy administration, demonstrated in and by its exactitude in rule-making. At the end of the day, strangely enough, most Singaporean homes display the national flag and other ornaments—but whether or not this is done proudly or perfunctorily as an annual decorative ritual remains a moot point.

The host of events and such debates that characterise Singapore's National Day makes it an ideal site for the articulation of cultural policy, understood here as the 'clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings' (McGuigan, 1996, p. 1)<sup>8</sup>. Singaporean authorities are aware of the need to constantly produce and circulate new symbolic meanings with the aim of maintaining political power through the control, or, to use Foucault's (1977) term, the 'disciplining', of its citizens. In other words, cultural policy in Singapore is predicated upon the notion of controlling

thought and behaviour of its citizens—what American anthropologist Gurin (1995) calls the capturing of 'broad public sentiments'. A crucial part of this control and shaping of public sentiments is getting Singaporeans to imagine themselves as disciplined, law-abiding, and patriotic citizens—not of the present alone, but of the future. According to Birch (1993), power-wielders in Singapore are eager to maintain 'reality-myths which position Singapore as a society always in danger, always attempting by hard work and sacrifice to avert some future crisis' (p. 3). Further, Birch (1996) also makes clear that cultural policy in Singapore is really a strategic policy of control, part of an overall economic and developmental policy insisting upon political and social stability at all costs. Indeed, Singaporean geographer Kong (2000a) points out that in 'pragmatic' Singapore, the major motivation behind cultural policy is economic(s)<sup>9</sup>. After all, as Kong explicates, the economic works in and through the sociocultural (p. 410). Therefore, as long as Singaporeans perceive culture and cultural policy from an economic standpoint, the Government has little to fear in terms of policy non-compliance or electoral backlash at the polls.

Yet the emergence of younger, better-educated, and more globalised middle-class Singaporeans means that the Government can no longer treat the present population in the paternalistic ways of the past. Like large multinationals and conglomerates, bureaucracies around the world are now having to behave like good corporate citizens and take public relations and opinion seriously. Singapore is no exception. In recent years, the Prime Minister has used the National Day Rally speech to flesh out new ideas and prospective policy directions. This enables the Government to prepare citizens for policy changes, and to gauge public opinion sufficiently early so as to make an informed decision on their next political move.

In 1999, *Singapore 21: Together We Make the Difference*, Singapore's vision splendid<sup>10</sup> of the 21st century, was unveiled. The *Singapore 21* vision, which aims to strengthen 'the intangibles of society—social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of a people' (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999), is first an exercise in economic and political expedience. Concomitantly, due to its call for Singaporeans to embrace attitudinal change, it is also, by extension, a statement of cultural policy. The Government's desire to increase the inflow of white-collar workers from overseas to boost Singapore's competitiveness in the new information- and knowledge-based economy provides the best illustration of *Singapore 21's* agenda for sociocultural change. The concept of *Singapore 21* was first articulated by Prime

Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1997 National Day Rally Speech entitled *Global City, Best Home* (Goh, 1997). Among other things, Goh stated that just as there are many Singaporeans living and working overseas, there is also a need for Singapore to 'gather talent and make Singapore a cosmopolitan city' the like of London, New York, and Hong Kong (pp. 28–39). Goh foreshadowed the imminence of a major shift in Government policy. This simple speech was to radically affect Government ministries and departments, including those managing the arts and cultural portfolios. Fewer than two months after Goh's speech, the project of *Singapore 21* was launched to look into immigration policy, global labour arrangements, and other equally pertinent national issues (Fernandez, 1997, p. 1).

Although the plan to inject foreign talent into Singapore is a sound economic policy, the prospect of Singaporean citizens losing their 'rice-bowls' to foreigners did not go down too well. In short, it was an unpopular policy—xenophobia, ignorance, as well as false patriotism soon began to take over. The Government had to manage such overtly nationalistic sentiments not by withdrawing or reversing the policy, but by assuring every Singaporean that they would be well looked after in an increasingly global era. There was, in other words, a need to 'popularise' the policy position by mobilising the mass media, the press, Government departments, statutory authorities, and other public apparatuses to speak favourably on the issue. Prime Minister Goh then gave greater prominence to the issue of 'gathering talent' at the next National Day Rally Speech in 1998. This time, however, the term 'foreign talent' was used to remove possible traces of ambiguity. In a clear attempt at assuaging public discontentment, Goh (1998) argued:

For while we attract foreign talent and welcome foreigners who contribute to our economy, Singapore must always have a hard core of citizens, cohesive and totally committed to the country, around whom we can attract other talent and build a nation.

As Government departments had ample time and feedback to prepare an inclusive policy and vision statement, the final outcome, presented as the 'five broad pillars' of *Singapore 21*, was thus able to embody and alleviate some key concerns<sup>10</sup>. The five pillars, designed to encompass an extensive range of issues and concerns, are as follows:

1. Every Singaporean Matters
2. Strong Families: Our Foundation and Our Future
3. Opportunities for All
4. The Singapore Heartbeat
5. Active Citizens: Making a Difference to Society.



Popularisation in the Singaporean context does not imply that a policy is well liked or fully supported by citizens. Rather, the strategy of popularisation aims primarily to minimise opposition and attain, if necessary, 'blind' (or muted) acceptance of the Government's performance. The 'struggle for the popular', according to Bennett's (1983) analysis of Marxist cultural politics in Britain, is conceived as one of 'seeking to displace current and actual forms of "the people"'s culture with a different content', in the hope that 'the people' might eventually be led to appropriate the new content, and therefore culture, as their own (p. 17). In other words, popularisation is used as a strategy to manage sociocultural change by attaining political legitimacy and public endorsement not necessarily for the betterment of society, but for the maintenance of power. With immense power to define the future mould of Singapore's citizenry regarding the 'foreign talent' issue, and to construct the terms on which the people should be mobilised, *Singapore 21* is (undoubtedly) a useful popularisation strategy of the PAP Government in enacting and enforcing a cultural policy of control.

The next section of this paper extends the notion of popularisation by looking at the employment and deployment of national songs within Singapore. Rather than perceive national songs as peripheral or 'mundane accompaniments to the annual National Day Parade and key celebratory events such as the National Day Rally, I raise the (symbolic) profile of national songs by positioning them as tools of cultural policy, thus political strategies and 'realities' in their own right. In so doing, I locate the populist aspects of Singapore's popularisation strategy in exacting further cultural and ideological control over its citizenry (Birch, 1996; Lee & Birch, 2000).

#### **NATIONAL SONGS: CULTURAL POLICY (PER)FORMED**

According to Leong (1999), the admission into the NDP of popular cultural items such as music, dance performances, and pop songs since the mid-1980s has incited greater participation (p. 4). But perhaps the most participatory element of National Day celebrations is the mass singing of national songs (along with the national anthem), which Leong describes as a clear 'populist strategy to engage the masses' (p. 4). Chng (2000a) echoes Leong when she notes most cogently in her preview of NDP 2000 that

the build-up for the NDP and National Day starts with the latest Singapore [national] song played over the TV and radio in July. There is also a Sing Singapore Committee... to discover and promote original songs written by Singaporeans. Songs such as 'Count on Me Singapore' and 'Stand Up

for Singapore' have become NDP classics. Always sung at the NDP, they never fail to bring forth a swelling of national pride even for viewers at home. (p. 18)

Some of the better-known national songs, or 'NDP classics', include

- *There's a Part for Everyone* (1984)—part of the centralised and collective effort by the Singapore Government to launch Singapore's 'total defence' foreign policy
- *Stand Up for Singapore* (1985; revised 2000)
- *Count on me, Singapore* (1986; revised 2000)
- *We are Singapore* (1987; revised 2000)
- *One People, One Nation, One Singapore* (1989)
- *Home* (1998)
- *Together* (1999)—to launch the *Singapore 21* vision statement
- *Shine On Me* (2000)
- *Majulah Singapura* (1959; revised 2001)—Singapore's national anthem

These national songs are usually written and performed by well-known or identifiable local artists or television/radio celebrities. The songs—and the artists, who are really more interested in boosting their public persona and hence net economic worth—receive extensive publicity over local television, radio, and the Internet through August (and sometimes July). In addition, these songs are generously commissioned and officially endorsed by the Ministry of Information and the Arts. As a result, national songs have become powerful mediators in the relay of nationalist messages and images to the Singaporean citizenry. In recent years, not only are these songs aired over the dominant local mass media, they are recorded in digital format, distributed, and sold in various formats, including compact disc (CD), video-CD (VCD), and digital versatile disc (DVD). Examples of such recordings include *NDP 33: Remembering Our Past 33 National Day Parades* (1999, VCD format); *My Home, Singapore: Documentaries and Music Videos on Singapore* (1999, VCD format); and, *Singapore: One Voice* (2000, VCD & DVD formats), which boasts a complete collection of national songs accompanied by music video clips. With these recordings, Singaporeans can not only have their favourite national songs 'on-demand', they are able to screen images of National Day and the nation within the private domain of their living rooms. The notion of the NDP as a 'mediatory' event, as advanced by Velayutham (1995), thus takes on an added cultural dimension.

The appeal of a well-composed national song, like any good song, is one that traverses both time (e.g., 'NDP classics') and space, since the live telecasting of the NDP reaches out to media audiences, whether they are watching at home or in attendance at the Padang (field), the parade ground outside Singapore's City Hall. To ensure that home viewers get the best of a live telecast parade, lyrics are subtitled in real time, encouraging participation karaoke fashion (Lim, 1999, p. 133). More recently, the lyrics, soundtrack, and video clips of most national songs have also been lodged on the *Sing Singapore* website<sup>11</sup>. This website vividly captures the essence and imagination of Singapore's high-tech status, allowing listeners to download any national song in MP3 format to their personal computers or portable music devices, and to download any music video clip. Any accompanying music video may also be downloaded for future viewing. The National Arts Council, the statutory body tasked with the responsibility of managing these national songs, ensures that they are widely and easily accessible to Singaporeans both at home and away—one of the most, if not the most, basic aspect of promotion and popularisation of the nation.

Engel (1866), in his landmark study into the background and traditions of 'national music', contends that the form and spirit of popular music compositions vary greatly in different nations. From an anthropological point of view, the study of national music and songs is useful because it illustrates the distinctive characteristics of various countries and their people (see also Williams, 1963). Engel notes the significance of national songs in marking out or promoting a particular period or event in a nation's history (p. 12). According to Engel,

the term National Music implies that music, which, appertaining to a nation or tribe, whose individual emotions and passions it expresses, exhibits certain peculiarities more or less characteristic, which distinguishes it from the music of any other nation or tribe. (p. 1)<sup>12</sup>

Engel also submits that the more a nation advances in civilisation and self-esteem, the more it seeks to symbolise and express its feelings about itself through popular songs, folklore, and other monuments. Engel's observation is cogently reflected in Singapore's *Renaissance City Report* (MIA, 2000), a Government report outlining the strategic steps necessary to revitalise Singapore's arts and cultural industry. On a global scale, Singapore aims to become, as the title of the report suggests, a premier 'renaissance city' of the arts of the 21st century, the like of New York, London, Melbourne, and Glasgow. On a local level, however, the aim is to 'strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat', or its collective identity, through the expression of 'Singapore stories in culture and the arts'

(executive summary). National songs perform a similar function, as their lyrics and themes tend to focus on the distinctive aspects—the 'peculiarities'—of Singaporean culture and identity. In this way, the discourse of national songs becomes a part of the physical, social, cultural, and political 'renaissance', or (re)construction, of Singapore's nationhood.

The emotive and heart-warming appeal of the national song *Home* (1998), for instance, attempts to capture the peculiarities and other intangible aspects of being Singaporean. Written by reputable singer-songwriter Dick Lee and performed by local pop-singer Kit Chan, this ballad suggests that Singapore is 'home' wherever one chooses to go<sup>13</sup>:

Wherever I am feeling low, I look around me and I know  
There's a place that will stay within me, wherever I may choose to go  
I will always recall the city, know every street and shore  
Sail down the river which brings us life, winding through my Singapore

*Chorus:*

This is home truly, where I know I must be  
Where my dreams wait for me, where that river always flows  
This is home surely, as my senses tell me  
This is where I won't be alone, for this is where I know it's home  
  
When there are troubles to go through, we'll find a way to start anew  
There is comfort in the knowledge that home's about its people too  
So we'll build our dreams together, just like we've done before  
Just like the river which brings us life, there'll always be Singapore

In this song, 'home' is both a metaphysical construct as well as a geographical reality: a place that stays 'within' one's 'senses' and, at the same time, an urbanised 'city' with 'its people', a flowing 'river', 'street and shore', and so on. In short, the song suggests that Singaporean identity does not simply consist of rooting oneself geophysically on

Singapore soil; it is more important to stay passionately true to Singapore, for it is where 'my dreams wait for me, where the river always flows'.

The lyrics of *Home* reinforce the vision of *Singapore 21*, which, among other agendas, calls for Singaporeans to become global in their outlook. It is thus consistent with Prime Minister Goh's call to encourage 'foreign talent' and thus embrace cosmopolitanism, returning Singapore to its status as a truly vibrant global city. While not overtly expressing it, the song also issues a call to skilled Singaporeans residing or working overseas to return to the 'streets and shore' of homeland Singapore. Concomitantly, those Singaporeans who do not venture abroad, euphemistically referred to by Singapore's politicians and mass media as the 'heartlanders', are also assured of their place in a society that is 'about its people too'. *Home*, in effect, popularises and performs Singapore's current cultural policy statement as exemplified in *Singapore 21*. Putting the ideals of the government into a national song not only entertains, it also fulfils erstwhile aims to further root Singaporeans—near and far—to their 'imagined' beloved nation, while signalling and preparing its citizens for further cultural (policy) changes ahead. In this case, one can expect the city, street, and shore to be filled with non-, or more appropriately 'new', overseas-born and/or foreign-trained 'Singaporeans'. A 'patriotic' Singaporean, one who calls Singapore 'home', must therefore 'go through troubles' and accept changes graciously, or be left behind—if not economically, then socioculturally. Such is the new 'reality' of Singapore envisioned in *Singapore 21*.

The remake of the 1985 'NDP classic' *Stand Up For Singapore* by the Ministry of Information and the Arts for the National Day 2000 celebrations is, perhaps, the most blatant attempt at popularising Singapore as a 'hip' and 'cool' cosmopolitan city. It is also the most illustrative—the music video clip, made to accompany the new version, was a radical departure from convention. While the original clip of the song is straight-laced and austere in its message of how and why one ought to 'stand up' and support Singapore, the new version is the opposite. Energetic and youthful in every aspect, the new clip was certain to make heads turn. Whether this was done in disdain or admiration is not so important; its ability to signify and portray a culturally vibrant city-state is more lasting and potent. In *Stand Up For Singapore* (2000), the four lead singers (two males and two female, in their late-teens to mid-twenties) dance in the subway station, on the streets, in parklands, on the rooftop of a skyscraper, and in and on other aesthetic locales, to a jazzed-up version of the song. The clip (over)emphasises the vigour of

youthful Singapore: one of the male leads even sports long and unkempt hair. This caricature is somewhat shocking, recalling the well-circulated rumour that long-haired men entering Singapore had their hair cut by customs officers. Furthermore, to this day, males in the civil service, and in many other Singaporean organisations, are not permitted long hair at work. This clip indicates that, among other things, the authorities are now prepared to overlook such rules—dated and less relevant from an economic standpoint (Kong, 2000a). The vision is that the new economy demands entrepreneurial and artistic creativity; by showing that Singaporeans are able to loosen up, foreign 'talent' may be persuaded to establish themselves in the country. (The closing sequence of the video depicts a group of police officers, military personnel, and other uniformed staff joining the lead singers in jumping and dancing to the music and beat. It is equally unfathomable. One could mistakenly think that the song was entitled '*Jump for Singapore*'!)

*Stand Up For Singapore* (2000) best exemplifies the Government's popularisation strategy: not only does this rendition debunk many of the myths associated with Singapore, it is successful insofar as it promotes Singapore as a truly progressive city. It also didactically imparts this new image to the younger generation of Singaporeans—many of whom risk defecting to the category of 'unbelievers' (Leong, 1999)—clearly the prime target audience of this national song and video campaign. The popularisation of Singapore as young, energetic, (pro)active, vibrant, and 'cool' aims to displace the perceptions of Singapore as a sterile city-state of boring, econocentric leaders and humourless people. Through the gradual perfection of this popularisation strategy, Singapore's cultural policy of control to achieve rapid economic growth and development is no longer visibly or overtly enforced—because, after all, the material fruits of economic success are openly manifested. Instead, citizens are urged to actively participate and support (thus legitimising) the State's panoramic vision, whether this comes in the form of an NDP speech, *Singapore 21* blueprint (Singapore 21 Committee, 1999), or *Renaissance City Report* (MIA, 2000a). Finally, popularising Singapore is about attaining political legitimacy and longevity for the ruling party. As Kong (2000a) elucidates:

The ultimate concern is to develop in Singaporeans a love for their country, a sense of patriotism, and a willingness to support the ruling elite who have led the country through the short years since independence to tremendous development. (p. 418)

In this regard, 'reality' has not really changed.

## CONCLUSION

The PAP Government recognises that popularising Singapore through parades, carnivals, national songs, and other modes of entertainment constitutes an extremely effective means of mobilising citizens to support Government-led initiatives and policies. As discursive symbols of nationhood, the consumption of these popular cultural items has the potential to raise public consciousness regarding the framing of a communitarian culture and national identity—a noble agenda that is likely to find little resistance (Chua, 1995). As a result, the popularisation of national songs, for instance, a project that began in the 1980s, intensified in the late 1990s, and is set to continue into the 2000s.

The Government has pumped in large sums to commission the audio and video production of new songs. In typically Singaporean fashion, the older favourites, including *Stand Up For Singapore*, have undergone major revamps, with new arrangements and innovative new music video clips made to captivate, and capture, new audiences<sup>14</sup>. In 2001, the much-revered national anthem *Majulah Singapura* was revamped at a cost of S\$200,000, making it 'more accessible to all Singaporeans' (MIA, 2001)<sup>15</sup>:

[The] new recording of the National Anthem, *Majulah Singapura*, with a grander and more inspiring arrangement, is set to *become more popular with Singaporeans*. The new recording also comes with a revised English translation of the lyrics so that the meaning of the Anthem can be better understood. (emphasis added)

Like other national songs, the new version of the national anthem comes complete with its own music video and music score sheets. In addition, to ensure that the anthem becomes 'more popular' with all Singaporeans, seven different versions of the anthem, including orchestral, choir/solo, and piano, have been recorded for teaching and singing purposes (see Tan, 2001a, 2001b).

The popularisation of the national anthem fulfils two objectives. First, the song has been given a slower tempo and transposed down a tone from the key of G to F to make it easier for people to sing. Children, who are required to sing the anthem at school assembly every morning, are thus able to reach the notes comfortably and, hopefully, be moved by it. The second, and arguably more pertinent, objective is that a revised English translation of the lyrics has also been produced. As Birch (1993) observes, while most are able to sing the song 'with pride', very few actually understand what the Malay lyrics mean (p. 1). Singapore's desire to spurn all things Malaysian means that it is important to remedy this language barrier not by teaching conversational Malay, but by trans-

lating it into English—the neutral language of Singapore. After all, *Majulah Singapura*, or 'Onward Singapore', symbolises and celebrates Singapore's new-found freedom—first from British-colonial rule, then from Malay/sian ethnic dominance. (The 'reality' of 9 August is thus embedded within the discourse of national songs and cultural policy.)

The popularisation of the nation in celebrations and in the singing of both national songs and the national anthem is a strategy not only for the long-term evocation and sustenance of national pride, but also for immediate effect—in reinforcing the hegemony of the economic and the political. While new policy statements and strategies may be devised from time to time, the aim of producing and/or maintaining docile but economically useful and politically compliant citizens remains the *zeitgeist* of cultural policy in Singapore.

#### NOTES

1. The Prime Minister's annual National Day Rally speech, resembling the presidential State of the Union Address in the US, is continued to this day. Unlike the first rally speech (1966), which was held on the eve of National Day, the rally speech of today marks the close of Singapore's National Day celebrations.
2. The first National Day Parade was aptly titled the 'First Independence Anniversary Parade' (Chng, 2000a, p. 17).
3. See Chng's (2000b) preview of National Day Parade 2000, also dubbed 'The Millennium Parade'.
4. For further reading on the politics and 'disciplining' of language, racial, and cultural difference in Singapore, see Puroshotam (1998).
5. I attended the National Day Parade 2000 and visited the Marina South 'Carnival@TheBay' event in August 2000. (For more information on NDP 2000, see the souvenir programme *National Day Parade 2000*.)
6. It is worth noting that the theme of NDP 1999 was similar: 'Our People: Together, We Make The Difference'. The decision to replicate the theme suggests that the Government wanted sustained emphases on the vision and agenda spelled out in *Singapore 21*.
7. NDP spectators in the viewing gallery are usually given kits containing baseball caps, sponsored snacks, drinks, goodies, and gadgets—flags, torches, and drum kits for the spectator to use during participation items and other segments of the mass displays. See Chng (2000a) and Leong (1999, p. 11).
8. The study of 'cultural policy' comes in variants, with some using the term to refer to museum and arts administration (see Bennett, 1995, 1998; DiMaggio, 1986), and others linking culture with the econ-



omy to form 'cultural economic policy' (see Kong, 2000a, 2000b). In this paper, I approach culture and cultural policy from a broad perspective, that is, as a means of understanding the Singaporean way of life, and how it is framed, controlled, and governed.

9. See Chapter 3 of Chua (1995) for an explanation and critical assessment of the PAP Government's employment of the ideology of pragmatism.
10. I do not imply here that *Singapore 21* was a wholly successful exercise in public consultation and consensus-seeking. Although *Singapore 21* has been couched as a large-scale consultative exercise involving some 6,000 Singaporeans, many views and comments were conveniently overlooked, both before and after the exercise. For a deeper understanding/analysis of *Singapore 21*, read the vision in its entirety and/or see Lee (2001, 2002).
11. *Sing Singapore* was introduced by the Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1988 to promote national bonding through group singing of national songs. In 1995, the National Arts Council took over the organisation of the *Sing Singapore* project. At the time of revising this paper (September 2002), the website (<http://www.singsingapore.org.sg/>) featured a total of 23 songs in different moods and styles. Instrumental versions may also be downloaded for sing-along sessions karaoke fashion.
12. The use of the term 'national music' covers a whole range of musical types, including *Volksmusik* (folk music), popular music, songs, tunes, anthems, various musical performances, and instruments, etc. These terms are used somewhat interchangeably in this paper.
13. For further reading on the works and 'new Asian' appeal of Dick Lee, see Wee (1996).
14. Other national songs revamped and re-released in 2000 include *Count on me, Singapore* and *We are Singapore (Singapore: One Voice, 2000)*.
15. The original *Majulah Singapura* was composed by the late Zubir Said in 1957. It debuted in 1959 and was adopted as Singapore's national anthem in 1965.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dr Greg McCarthy (Department of Politics, The University of Adelaide); Dr Wanning Sun (Curtin University of Technology, Perth); and Irvin Lim (Republic of Singapore Navy) for providing useful comments and stimulating further thoughts and discussions on this paper.

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